

**LEARNING  
BY DOING**

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Learning by doing by Edgar James Swift

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**EDGAR JAMES SWIFT**

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# LEARNING BY DOING

*By*

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SECOND EDITION

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WITH INTRODUCTION

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Editor Childhood and Youth Series

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The chief business of the child and of the youth in American life to-day is to master some portion of the knowledge and the skill which our ancestors have found of service in their experiences in the art of living; and it follows that the chief problems of the parent and the teacher have to do with helping the young to acquire this knowledge and skill in an economical and effective manner. No one in our time, who is at all familiar with the matter, can doubt that both the child and his instructor, whether he be parent or teacher, have to deal with a very complicated situation in the present-day home and school. There is a constantly increasing body of material to be learned, and the period for learning it is not being extended, so that it is becoming ever more imperative for those who instruct the young to adopt methods of procedure which will enable the novice to master what he must learn without waste of time or energy. This is, of course, an ideal which has not yet been attained in any of our educational work, as every student of education and every intelligent parent and teacher knows very well. But we are certainly making progress. We are discovering from time to time how to guide the child so that he will appropriate the more readily and competently what we believe we ought to teach him. Doubtless most of those who will read these lines have witnessed marked changes in the teaching of practically every subject in the curriculum of the elementary and the high school; and probably these changes have all been in the direction of attaining greater economy and efficiency in educational work.

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But the end is not yet; it is probable, indeed, that the principal work of improvement in teaching processes is still ahead of us. Surely there has never been a time, in any age or place, when educational curricula and methods have been studied by such precise methods as are being employed right now, both at home and abroad. It is becoming clearer every day that the whole business of teaching is so complex that the practical teacher can not solve the problems of the schoolroom, because his time and energy must be expended in doing the best he can according to the prevailing and generally accepted views of instruction. The practitioner needs the assistance of the investigator, who will delve deeply into one or another of the problems arising out of the necessity of leading the young to master a great many things in such a way that they can make use of them in bettering their adjustment to the world of people and of things environing them.

For a number of years Professor Edgar James Swift has been conducting experiments for the purpose of gaining some accurate data pertaining to the more subtle phases of the processes of acquiring certain kinds of knowledge, and mastering certain manual activities. In this work he has had a practical end in view, so that his researches have related more or less directly to the problems which the teacher encounters in giving her pupils instruction in any school subject. As a result of his investigations, Professor Swift has apparently shown that a pupil does not pursue a regular, unbroken and uniform course in the mastery of any study, but instead he seems to proceed rapidly at one period of his learning, and slowly or not at all at another period. In the present volume, Professor Swift



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describes his own experiments and those of other investigators, and he points out how the results of these inquiries may explain some of the phenomena of the class room that are often perplexing to the teacher. He also makes suggestions respecting the teaching of the various school studies which should be of assistance to all who instruct the young, in enabling them particularly to help pupils over the periods of retardation in their learning,—the "plateau periods," as they are coming to be styled in present-day psychological literature.

Professor Swift's book is wholly constructive. It is also appreciative. He gives evidence in every chapter of his volume that he is aware of the difficulties under which the parent and teacher work, and his purpose is, first, to assist them to understand the child whom they must instruct, in respect to certain of his interests and tendencies and intellectual traits, and, second, to show what relation the learner must assume toward the things he is required to learn in order that he may gain them with as little resistance and as great efficiency as possible. All the matters treated are presented in a simple and direct, but lively style, and in non-technical language; and it may be hoped that the book will find its way into the hands of many parents and teachers, who can hardly fail to be interested in and profited by reading it.

M. V. O'SHEA.

Madison, Wisconsin.



## PREFACE

The industrial and commercial changes which have followed one another in rapid succession during the last three or four decades have brought in their wake new educational problems. As a direct outgrowth of these changes comes the insistent demand for a reorganization of our public schools that they may better fit children to meet the new conditions.

Superintendents and boards of education have tried to satisfy the new requirements by enlarging the curriculum and, in some cases, by introducing vocational guidance and training. The writer is in hearty agreement with the spirit of these changes, but he also believes that the manner of conducting the work of the school may be improved, and it is with this question, together with progress and economy in learning, that the present book is chiefly concerned. Why should the school program be separated into the subjects which the children learn by doing and those which they learn from the teacher's instruction and from books? Why could not both methods be combined? The writer is of the opinion that the principle of "learning by doing" is applicable to all the studies of the school and that it should cease to be merely an attachment to school methods, to be used in certain subjects, such as manual training, and in a few others on "laboratory days." The instruction from teacher and books should accompany or follow the achievements of the pupils in the things they are trying to do. In this way instruction assumes its proper rôle, that of putting meaning into the work in which the pupils